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Abilene, Texas – Incentives Abound

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Most mid-sized American cities would likely leap at the chance to trade places with Abilene, Texas.

At a time when many municipalities are struggling to attract jobs and capital investments, Abilene finds itself in the truly enviable position of possessing bona fide prospects, having earned distinction as a leader in the emerging wind-energy market just as a veritable money storm of public and private dollars begins to blow.

Nonetheless, much as Abilene knows it can bank on breezes — *some folks will tell you Texas winds blow so hard they use log chains for wind socks* — the community of 125,000 has not been content to court one industry.

During the past few years alone the city's economic initiatives have included the construction of a biotech facility, investment in a school of pharmacy, and the addition of a software manufacturer to the local business rolls, just to name a few.

"You have to find jobs for men and women, old and young," says William J. Ehrie, president of the Abilene Industrial Foundation, an agency of the city's Chamber of Commerce. "You got a whole variety of opportunities that you have to consider."

To aid in its pursuit of that goal, Abilene has a rare and special tool — a half-cent sales tax that provides a steady flow of dollars dedicated to economic development. That's meant millions, not thousands, which has made the job of agencies like the AIF and the Development Corporation of Abilene that much easier as they work to attract green-energy providers, and to provide assistance to businesses in unrelated industries, both those already in Abilene as well as those looking to invest.

The results are as obvious on the local business rolls as they are in the scarcity of vacant industrial space.

"Abilene gets it," says Michael Hackman, founder and chief executive officer of Hackman Capital Partners, LLC, an investor in a joint venture which acquired Windstar Industrial Center, a 782,000-square-foot warehouse/distribution facility near the junction of Interstate 20 and Highway 83.

“There’s an old, Will Rogers line that goes something like ‘If you’re riding ahead of the herd, you best look back every now and again to make sure it’s still with you,’” says Hackman. “Abilene isn’t just out there looking to attract newcomers. Abilene understands the importance of retaining businesses once it’s got them.”

That combination is a critical component of success, says Richard Burdine, the assistant city manager for economic development and chief executive officer of the DCOA, which administers the half-cent tax.

“We don’t want to be the last one to find out that a company is having trouble and needs some assistance,” says Burdine. “We want to know about it before it gets too far along. And, because of that, we get the opportunity to help a lot of existing businesses grow.”

Ehrie echoes a similar sentiment: “We do everything we can. What is one person’s way to get employed, another person may not like that. We value our youngest generation. We value our oldest generation.”

For example, in the current fiscal year, which ends in September, Burdine says Abilene put together a half-million-dollar package to help leverage a \$5 million capital investment by Coca-Cola Bottling Company of North Texas, which employs about 220 people. A couple years prior, the city also provided help to Abtex Beverage, another bottling company that employs about 270 people. That deal totaled \$1.6 million in assistance to help leverage a \$5.4 million capital investment and to ensure the retention of about 100 jobs.

Other local assistance projects included about \$3 million in start-up help for a Texas Tech University research center at the School of Pharmacy in Abilene.

Besides Abilene’s aspirations to become a leader in the wind industry, it’s also set its sights on biotech. To that end, Abilene officials have endeavored to build a \$5.3 million, 20,000-square-foot biomedical research center for lease to biotech companies. That project alone, also approved by the DCOA, is expected to result in 140 to 190 jobs.

In terms of attracting other types of industry to the area, last year the DCOA approved an assistance package of more than \$2 million for Genesis Networks Solutions, Inc., a high-tech firm that tests and develops software for the telecommunications industry, and others. It was set to create 150 new jobs.

Several economic observers have lately taken notice.

Business Development Outlook Magazine said in 2008 that Abilene was the nation’s 5th most eligible city for growth.

Likewise, Forbes magazine concluded in ‘08 that Abilene ranks among the top 100 best small cities for business and careers. Forbes notched Abilene 58th out of 179 metropolitan areas.

“Abilene, Texas – The Smart Place for Wind Industry Expansion” suitability study is available: visit www.windstarindustrialcenter.com and click the “[Wind Action](#)” newsfeed.



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